WHO'S THAT ON YOUR BALCONY?

November 2, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."
--Hebrews 12:1 (RSV)

Scripture
Hebrews chapters 11 and 12
Selected verses

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God." (11:1-3a)

"By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous." (11:4a)

"By faith E'noch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him." (11:5a)

"By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household;" (11:7a)

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go." (11:8)

"By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." (11:11)

"These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." (11:13)

"By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land;" (11:29a)

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Bar'ak, Samson, Jeph'thah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -" (11:32)

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (12:1,2)

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By faith, Rahab the harlot, did not perish with those who were disobedient 11:31

Some of us, I have concluded, suffer from a peculiar affliction which makes it physically impossible for us to pass by an historical plaque without trying to read it. There are a number of ways to sub-divide and categorize the human race. One of them is between those who regard historical plaques as useless clutter - the "history is bunk" folk - and those of us who regard an historical marker as an item of endless fascination, full of vital, life giving information, which must be read and pondered. Our affliction is not serious ordinarily, a nuisance perhaps to those who are walking with us. It can become a bit dangerous when we are driving through Gettysburg or Valley Forge and, of course, those who suffer this affliction all know how embarrassing it is when we let it get out of control and become an obsessive, reading of everything in print...and in spite of ourselves lean forward in the subway or airplane seat and crane our necks to read the title of the book the person across the aisle is reading and get caught.

I am a reader of plaques. I visited St. Michael's Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a magnificent old building with a spire visible from the harbor. The church has played an important role in that fascinating city for several centuries. The man who showed me around, however, kept telling me about the structure, but I kept being distracted by the plaques on the wall. They contain the story of the church.

> "To the glory of God and in memory of
> The Reverend So and So, Beloved Pastor
> who labored among us for 40 years."
>
> "In sacred memory of Artillery Sergeant
> Smith, Army of the Confederacy, killed
> at Vicksburg."
>
> "In memory of Colonel So and So,
> Banker, for 35 years Trustee of this church."

At a meeting in Indianapolis, Second Presbyterian Church, last week, I enjoyed seeing one of the last and loveliest Gothic Cathedral type buildings to be constructed in this country. But the best part is the fourth story corridor where they keep the old pictures, distinguished Victorian Elders and Trustees and a wonderful large portrait of a dignified woman who from 1880 until 1913 was the Superintendent of the Primary Department.

I read the plaques because they tell the story. They contain the names of the saints, the individual men and women whose faith and hope are confirmed by the continued existence of the church they enjoyed and loved, much as I enjoy and love it, decades, or a century ago. I read the plaques because they provide the content for that curious affirmation I make every Sunday when I stand up and recite: "I believe in the Communion of Saints."

Yet the more Protestant we are the less it seems we talk about saints and the more the word Saint takes on a sticky sentimentality which results in our using it negatively to affirm our normality, our humanity, as in "I'm no saint, you know."

There is a story in that and it needs retelling every so often, particularly at this time of year, this week to be exact. And so, please indulge me and hear again a part of our story. Actually there are three occasions - all of which occurred last week which bear the weight of this story: All Saints Day - November 1; the Eve of All Saints, known in history as All Hallows Eve - Hallows Eve- Halloween; and the Day of All Hallows, October 31, the occasion an Augustinian Monk by the name of Father Martin Luther chose to nail 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, for the purpose of debate - Reformation Day. Obviously, our Roman brothers and sisters don't celebrate that occasion much - although they're getting closer. Nor do we celebrate All Saints Day much - and we're not getting close, but we ought to be.

All Saints Day was the occasion in the Middle Ages to think about the Saints of the Church, to revere and adore the Saints in Masses for that purpose. (Please note, Protestants, that Roman Catholics have never worshiped Saints: but have adored and revered them which is a liturgical way of thanking them and we could learn something from that, I think.) In any event, the faithful invoked the favor of the saints in acts of piety and devotion and as often happened in the Middle Ages, a basically good idea got mixed up with superstition and then economics got into it with predictably disastrous results.

The superstitious were convinced that the dead were a little nearer the world of the living on All Saints Day. As they were thought about, revered and invoked, people with vivid imaginations thought they experienced their actual presence. In fact, if you had a really vivid imagination and were very quiet you might even catch a glimpse of them in the grave yard emerging from the shadows. How I hated, as a boy, the long walk home from the YMCA beside the Fairview Cemetery. And I do recall at least a different perspective on the matter when I finally shared my fear with my parents and they reminded me that "my own relatives were up there in that cemetery, too," and so my own morbid, medieval terror was tempered by the notion that some of those spirits might actually know me and recognize me as Bob and Blanche's boy and intercede with their friends on my behalf.

It was a good idea in the Middle Ages to be prepared on All Hallows Eve, after dark, to ward off unwelcome spirits, by carving a frightening face in a gourd or large squash and lighting it with a candle. Well, Martin Luther, restless Augustinian, chose the day before All Saints in 1517 to nail his Theses to the door in Wittenburg because a lot of people would be passing that way in the morning. All Saints was a big day in Wittenburg. The year before, Frederick the Wise had put his personal collection of sacred relics on display. It was a wonderful carnival. Historian Roland Bainton has preserved the record of contents of that collection for posterity: a thorn from the crown Jesus wore, one tooth from St. Jerome, four pieces of St. Chrysostom, four hairs of the Virgin Mary, seven pieces of her veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ. The relics of Jesus included a piece of the swaddling cloth from Bethlehem and a piece of bread from the Last Supper. Frederick's collection contained 19,012 Holy Relics... In Luther's time, it was popularly believed that if a Christian was fortunate enough to view all those relics on All Saints Day and make a generous contribution, he/she was granted an Indulgence - a

reduction of the time to be spent in Purgatory, for a maximum of 1,902,207 years and 270 days. [Here I Stand, Roland Bainton, p. 53]

Luther proposed, in his 95 Theses, to discuss this system. At the heart of it was the notion that the Saints had accumulated so much goodness during their lives, much of it was left over, in storage as it were, and available for distribution by the church, for a fee .. . a pretty effective stewardship program. When Luther's protest became a full scale revolt, its adherents, known as Protestors, or Protestants, wanted as little to do as possible with the notion of indulgences. And so the idea of Saints was assiduously avoided. And in that process, Western Protestant Christianity lost one of its more useful and important concepts. Most of us, as a matter of fact, don't know what we are affirming when we say, in the Creed that we believe in the Communion of Saints.

Let's think about that for a moment. We value individuality and autonomy in our culture - too much, some are saying. Sometimes, in order to affirm our individuality, we forget our connections, particularly our relationship to the past. We are never totally autonomous and we deny, cut off, alienate ourselves from something very important when we pretend as if we were an "island, entire of itself." You and I are, in fact, an astonishing amalgam of the past. We bear within us, in an incredible genetic structure and DNA code, a microcosm of a whole family at least and the whole race at best, only a tiny bit of which we know about. For better or worse we are deeply in debt to the past: to our parents directly, but also to their parents and their parents - and at that point our knowledge stops, but the influence on us does not. Have you ever reacted instinctively to a situation, a person, and been astonished because what you said, even the inflection in your voice, sounded exactly like your mother or father? Do you ever look at your younger sibling - as you grow older - and see the physical presence of your parent? We are not very autonomous.

That is true biologically, psychologically and spiritually. Martin Marty was lecturing at a Roman Catholic University after Vatican II. Some students were cheering a blasphemously furious ex-priest who was berating and scorning the Catholic Church in the most vivid language imaginable. Marty wrote: "I asked them why the applause. 'You'll never understand' one of them said, 'what an identity crisis the Catholic Church gave each of us.' I wondered out loud if they knew how lucky they were ever to have belonged to anything potent enough to give them an identity over which to have a crisis." [By Way of Response, p. 19]

Part of the experience of being a Christian is to know that you are connected to something bigger than yourself - which has a long history...and which is yours today only because many, many others lived and died for it and passed it on down to you... There is a small piece of Iona marble on my desk. On the island of Iona off the West Coast of Scotland, where an Irish missionary and soldier of fortune by the name of Columba landed in the sixth century. There are remains of a monastery and a restored Abby... To stand there is to have an expanded and deepened sense of what it means to be a Presbyterian Christian because it connects with the past and with some very real saints...

Nikos Kazantzakis, the novelist, reflected on those who had gone before. He hears the dead saying to the living: "Finish our work... All day and all night we come and go through your body... When you shake with fear, your terror...degrades innumerable souls before and behind you. When you rise to a valorous deed, all of your race rises with you." [The Saviors of God]

The novelist caught the reality which the church has always intended in the idea of the Communion of Saints. We are not autonomous. We are not alone. Those who have gone before us are with us.

No one in all of history needed to know that more urgently than the Christian people in the first few generations after the life and ministry of Jesus. The New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews was written for them - for their encouragement as they faced an uncertain future which almost certainly included persecution. "Remember," it urges, "those who preceded you: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses." "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," the writer exclaimed. And we are - you and I - surrounded and influenced by, and in the presence of men and women who gave us the gift of life, poured into us - out of their vessels - the rich wine of our personalities; gave us, from their own faith and hope - whatever faith and hope we have. Do you love the church? So did generations of your forebears. Are you impatient for justice in the world? It is a very Presbyterian reaction. Does something in you refuse to make peace with racism and oppression? Christians have been experiencing that and passing on down through generations for 2,000 years. Do you find that you cannot let go of hope - that each day you look for news that suggests we are moving toward peace? You stand in a long, long line of Christian people whose solid, unshakable hope began with Christ and was passed on down. How sad that we Protestants can't celebrate our saints, recognize them, name them, thank them, thank God for them.

The late Carlyle Marney, a delightful Southern Baptist preacher, philosopher - who devoted his later years to patching up the lives of hurting ministers, invented - as far as I know - my favorite image for the Communion of Saints - the Allegory of the Balcony.

Human personality, Marney said, can be compared to a house - a fairly elaborate, complex, variegated structure. Try that on for a minute. Some are fancy, some are simple, functional. Some are ostentatious, some are unnecessarily modest. Each has a number of rooms and it's helpful to know about each and who is in them. Each has a formal parlour, family room, dining room, kitchen. Each has a basement, where the plumbing is and the trash is kept. The Victorians had trouble admitting that there is a basement. But in our day we have begun to acknowledge our shadow selves. We have been sitting at the feet of Sigmund Freud for several generations and we know that we are capable of evil and that the old notion of original sin is not at all inaccurate.

The trouble is, Marney used to say, that having discovered that we have a basement, and that it's OK to have a basement, and that it is not particularly healthy to deny that there is a basement, we are convinced that we have to spend all our time in the basement, live down there. We act, sometimes, as if the plumbing and trash bin are all there is to us.

Someone quipped that the theological delineation of the "Me Generation" is that it is the first to celebrate rather than repent, when it discovered original sin.

There is more to us, however, than a basement. In fact, if you come up the stairs and step outside onto the front lawn and look up, you will see something else: some fancy architecture, for instance, a balcony, with a white, wrought-iron railing (Marney was a Southerner!) and on the balcony are some people, sipping iced tea, or bourbon, depending I suppose on whether you are Baptist or Presbyterian. Those people on your balcony are the good and strong and healthy influences in your life. Your parents are probably there, and your grandparents, and some others you know and some you don't know - and there are some there you never met in your life but they were and are very influential for you. The people on your balcony are your Saints.

It is a helpful exercise to identify them. In his autobiography, Frederick Buechner writes:

> "On All Saints Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, ... who one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may ever hope to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own." [The Sacred Journey, p. 74]

An appropriate way to observe All Saints Day, I submit, is to walk out into your garden and look up at your balcony. Identify the people who are there. Acknowledge them - parents, grandparents, teachers, aunts and uncles, coaches, friends. Name them. Wave to them. They are your Saints. And the others: Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Bonhoeffer, Schweitzer, Knox, Calvin, Luther, Peter, James, Martha, Mary, - they're up there too for you.

The doctrine of the Communion of Saints is an effort to express the mystery of faith that we are not alone; that in Jesus Christ we are not and never will be alone. It is only an effort. The deeper reality will always lie slightly out of reach of even our best theological efforts. But there is something here that needs saying, however stumbling and inadequate the words are. Those who have gone before us are with God...their reality did not end with the end of their lives...they are for us and with us...somehow in the mystery of the creator's love - which in Christ we have seen to be victorious over the event of human death...

The words bend under the weight of that. Hymns are better... "For all the Saints, who from their labors rest"... and stories - about Abraham and Sarah, Peter and Martha...

My grandfather was what a grandfather should be; a big man with the huge, strong hands of a railroad shop foreman, and beautiful white hair,

rumpled shirts smelling of cigar smoke and pieces of wintergreen candy in his coat pocket covered with Prince Albert Pipe tobacco. He lived well into his nineties. He was a presence in my life as an infant, child, adolescent, and as a young man I would visit him when I was home. The last time I saw him, he was quite ill. I was an ordained minister which was a source of both curiosity but also pride for him. My father insisted that I pray with him which I found difficult to do. But I did it, and as I left he waved in a jaunty manner and said, "Till we meet again, Johnny." And I know now what he meant. The Communion of Saints.

We are, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," Some of them we know. Some we have only heard of. Some we don't know. Some are very much alive. Some have been dead for centuries. Some died recently. They are our Saints. They are the strong and good and faithful influences in our lives.

We believe they are safe - in God's care.

Who are they for you? Who is on Your Balcony? Identify them. Thank God for them. Look up and wave at them.